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Long after Congress removed about \$450 million in budget earmarks for two bridges in the Alaskan exurbs, the fight over whether to build them is not dead.

Mocked as "bridges to nowhere" by critics who saw them as the epitome of Congressional excess, preparations for the projects have been slowly moving forward even as big questions remain over whether the bridges will be built.

When Congress removed the earmarks for the bridges in 2005, it still gave the state the money, but it allowed Alaskan officials to decide how to spend it. The state reserved about \$200 million for the proposed bridges, far less than the construction costs but enough to show that there was serious intent to complete the projects. Some environmental and planning work has already been done.

Supporters of one of the bridges, the Knik Arm Crossing, are expected to get the proposal included in Anchorage's long-range city transportation plan in April.

The agency charged with building the bridge, a private-public partnership, is courting private investors for a toll-driven, for-profit venture. If built, the Knik bridge - which has been discussed since before statehood in 1959 - could cost about \$1 billion beyond the approximately \$110 million the project has received from Congress.

"If we can't sell this to Wall Street, then we're just going to pack up and go home," said Gordon Keith, director of the central region for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and a board member of the agency trying to build the Knik Arm Crossing.

Five hundred miles away, on the remote, spruce-spiked island of Gravina in southeast Alaska, construction is set to begin this summer on three and a half miles of roads that are intended to connect the island's airport and its 50 residents to the other proposed bridge, a 200-foot-high arc over the Tongass Narrows to the city of Ketchikan.

That bridge could make the current route to the airport, a five-minute ferry ride, obsolete. For now, the road and causeway construction are continuing, at a cost of \$26 million, even as the bridge budget has ballooned to nearly \$400 million and its prospects remain uncertain. The money for the road construction was included in an earmark that was not cut.

Representative Mark Steven Kirk, a Republican from Illinois who last year sponsored a measure to strip all federal financing for the bridges, said "Whoa!" when told of the money being spent on the Gravina road work. "Our work to end taxpayer support for this isn't finished yet," Mr. Kirk said. His bill passed the House but was not adopted by the Senate.

"The jury has decided that this is not an appropriate use of federal funds," he said. "In the end, I don't think there's a good way to spend the money in Alaska. In the long run, this is money that

could go to other projects around the country, nearly all which would serve more than 50 people."

Regardless of the ridicule about the bridges as a pork-barrel binge, there are political facts that have kept hope alive for those who believe the projects are necessary for Alaska to grow economically.

To direct the federal financing to other projects, for example, would require action by Gov. Sarah Palin, a Republican, and the State Legislature. It would also mean undoing the work of the powerful Congressional delegation, led by Senator Ted Stevens and Representative Don Young, both Republicans, who secured the money for the bridges.

"No way in the world am I going to put myself in that position," said Mayor Joe Williams of Ketchikan Gateway Borough. "These guys were put through the wringer."

He added, referring to Mr. Young, "I may talk about it 10 years after he's dead and gone, but no way in the world am I going to do that now. I'm supporting that man because he supported us. That would be like going to Dad and talking about something Dad asked us to do and we didn't do it. That's not a good idea."

Mr. Williams said he believed the state overestimated the cost of the Gravina bridge because it would rather build other projects, including some closer to Juneau, the capital.

Mal Menzies, director for the southeast region of the state transportation department, noted that Ms. Palin had not included more money for Gravina in her proposed budget and that state planners were simply dealing in reality.

"I think the community is starting to see that the money for this project is not there," Mr. Menzies said. "They could be open to smaller bridges, but the problem is we don't even have the monies for the smaller bridges yet."

In Anchorage, some express a similar view about the Knik Arm Crossing.

"Originally it was a gift," said Jon R. Spring, a transportation planner with the Anchorage Traffic Department. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because we had these powerful congressmen. Well, that's no longer a rationale. Now it's a question of does it still make sense?"

The project has plenty of critics who worry it will add congestion to downtown Anchorage and encourage sprawl around Point MacKenzie, the largely empty area across the water to which the bridge would lead. Opponents also worry that the efforts to secure private financing will fail and that supporters will seek more government help, potentially undercutting financing for projects like a downtown highway link.

In Ketchikan, many people could not care less whether they get a new bridge. Yet the preliminary work planned for Gravina, part of an earlier earmark that was not removed, stirs hope for those who say they worry about the future in a region where people have been

departing ever since the timber industry began to fade. In 2005, the borough population was 13,262, down from 14,070 in 2000.

"The bridge to nowhere is the bridge to the future for our kids," Mr. Williams said, "because it is developable property and it is available to the borough for families to buy property and build their own home."

But even without a bridge right away, the new roads on the island could help lure a large manufacturer or a residential developer, he said. "One day in the future," Mr. Williams said, "we'll have to have a bridge, to accommodate those folks."